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Body

There's something weirdly biblical about the new ad showing Jagmeet Singh without his turban, as if by hiding his full head of hair he'd committed some strange Quebec-only heresy and had to atone by baring his locks in public.

The ad is a response to a law barring public-sector workers from any display of symbols representing religious belief. The law reflects fears and biases deeply embedded in the Quebec psyche by treating a bit of cloth as a threat to secularist convictions so dangerous it can be prevented only by removal of the offending garment.

Buried in the ad is Singh's message, an attempt to relate to Quebecers' eternal sense of alienation while taking a veiled shot at Justin Trudeau. "I'm not like the others," it relates in French. "Like you, I'm proud of my identity. No gifts, no inheritance, I've experienced enough injustice already to know how to fight." It's yet another play on identity politics, but the fact Singh would feel the need to undress to please Quebec is an ugly indication of just how low political parameters are falling in a country that keeps bragging about its respect for diversity and multiculturalism while accommodating snide asides about immigrants and ethnics.

Singh needs to placate Quebec because his party is in danger of being erased from its political map. Since Jack Layton's orange wave swept through the province in 2011, the party has suffered nothing but reversals, falling from 59 seats to just 16 in 2015, and trailing so badly in current polls that virtually every seat is in danger. Singh's party could find itself in fifth place, behind even the Greens, who are shaping up as a real rival to replace the NDP in other parts of the country as well.

That was demonstrated once again when 14 New Brunswick NDP candidates suddenly jumped ship to the Greens, setting off an ugly row about racist tendencies. The defectors complained that Singh had yet to visit the province as leader and urged other New Democrats to join them in shifting support to the Green party. A former member of the NDP's national executive ascribed the mutiny in part to fears New Brunswickers wouldn't vote for a party headed by a leader in a turban, which prompted angry words from Singh and a response from Green Leader Elizabeth May that "there is no room for any kind of racism" in her party.

Presumably there's no room for racism in any of the parties, but Singh's, the only one headed by anyone but a turbanless white person, is alone in feeling exposed. Quebec is also the home and political base of Maxime Bernier, leader of the newly invented People's Party, who took time off from warning about an immigrant influx to attack the 16-year-old **climate activist** Greta Thunberg as "mentally unstable," asserting she is "not only autistic, but obsessive-compulsive, eating disorder, depression and lethargy, and she lives in a constant state of fear." He later granted he shouldn't have gone after her mental health, saying he intended "absolutely not to denigrate her or whoever deals with these conditions," which is hard to believe. What else could his aim to have been ... asserting his admiration via insults? But that's where we appear to be headed in this campaign, which, even before it is formally launched, is in danger of being overwhelmed by personal attacks, smear jobs, gross exaggerations and the

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usual social media displays of mindless partisanship. Policy has nothing to do with it. Reasoned discussions of issues are nowhere to be seen.

The last thing Justin Trudeau's Liberals appear to desire is any examination of their record. They've been busy portraying Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer as a religious zealot who would threaten gay rights and access to abortion despite Scheer's public assertion that his government would oppose any attempt to reopen either issue. Jane Philpott, the former Liberal health minister who left the party over the SNC-Lavalin scandal, criticized the government Wednesday for its tactics.

"For Liberals in particular to politicize an issue that has to do with the choice that women make about their reproductive rights, I think is highly opportunistic and shows a focus on political expediency rather than truly respecting something that is such a serious and important personal matter for Canadians," she said.

Conservative campaigning has focused largely on their "not as advertised" attack ads, targeting a litany of government embarrassments while charging that "since (Trudeau's) election, his administration has been rocked by corruption on top of corruption on top of corruption" and questioning his self-declared feminist credentials by noting the "four women he chased out of the party for daring to stand up for what's right."

While Liberal targets are abundant, there is little mention from Scheer of concrete alternatives other than a vow to reverse the carbon tax and some tepid pledges to work hard on behalf of struggling Canadians.

Most recently he accused Liberals of "festering anti-Semitism" over the remarks of a Montreal candidate who was later dropped by the party. Meanwhile, David Akin of Global News, who spent the summer tracking Liberal pre-election spending, reported that in August alone the party made 4,545 new spending commitments worth \$12.8 billion in total, nine times the amount pledged by the Harper government before the 2015 campaign.

It doesn't promise much in the way of a civilized campaign, or an opportunity for Canadian voters to make a decision based on any detailed understanding of where the parties stand and what they might offer.

There is still time for decorum to break out, and a show of respect for voters, if not for each other. The issues in Canada are important, but not so critical that the parties and their leaders need to treat one another as an existential threat to life as we know it.

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